No Friend Of Mine – A Transient Void Tales Novella

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Autobiographical memory: When I wrote that only the dying, ghosts, and gay tend to obsess about their afterlife, it was still legal humor, and preparation for the full-spectrum-gay concept that `Gayferatu´ needed, so to stay horror fiction instead of political hate sermon.

YES OUIJA NO
ABCDEFGHIJKLM
NPQRSTUVWXYZ
123456789
GOOD BYE
You've died a year ago, but your cats still meow at you for food at 2am each morning...

Chapter 1: Before the Hotel

The hotel room in Istanbul had a painting above the bed that the artist formally known as Bryce Succor had not noticed until late Tuesday afternoon, when the light from the window hit it at a precise angle, making it seem to recede into itself. The painting was abstract, or perhaps merely deteriorated beyond recognition, and depicted either a landscape or a dissolution of landscape. Ochre, green, and grey. He was supposed to be reviewing the notes for his presentation, the one he would give tomorrow morning on the complicity of Western artistic institutions in the machinery of empire, but instead he found himself staring at this painting, trying to determine whether it was intentionally ugly. Or merely old. Whether its failure was a perception-flavored aesthetic or historical.

The symposium occupied the lower three floors of the hotel. All morning and afternoon, there had been conversations in the lobby, theorists, curators, artists, critics, all of them performing the ritual of intellectual engagement, all of them circulating their grievances and their theories like currency. Bryce had participated. He had listened to a panel on decolonizing the archive. He had sat through a presentation on the ethics of representation in contemporary art. He had nodded at the right moments and felt, beneath the engagement, a kind of hollow exhaustion, the exhaustion of performing opposition for an audience that was itself performing opposition, everyone caught in the same recursive loop of critique, everyone speaking from positions they believed to be authentic, yet which felt, increasingly, like ignorances' jolly choreography.

His presentation was tomorrow at nine in the morning. Title: "The Aesthetics of Refusal: Toward a Non-Complicit Visual Practice." He had written it over the course of three months. He had revised it five times. It articulated his position on the impossibility of creating art that did not, in some fundamental way, participate in the systems it claimed to oppose. The position was not original. It was, in fact, quite familiar to everyone in his circle.

But it was his position, articulated in his voice, grounded in his work, the photographic series he had produced in Detroit, the conceptual piece about the consumption of Black bodies in white museums, the performance installation about the economics of cultural appropriation.

He believed in the work. Or rather, he had not yet fully confronted the possibility that believing in the work was itself a kind of performance, a way of constructing an identity as resistant rather than as complicit.

There was a knock at the door. Bryce did not immediately answer. He looked at the painting one more time, then at his notes, then at the window where the light was beginning to shift toward evening.

The knock came again, three sharp, precise taps against the door. Not urgent. Not aggressive. Simply insistent.

The woman who entered when he opened the door was not someone he recognized. She was professionally dressed, with a blazer, notepad, and carried with her the kind of administrative authority that made Bryce immediately defensive. Before he could speak, she was explaining that there had been a scheduling adjustment. The symposium was restructuring its sessions. Certain presenters had been selected for a special evening event, an exclusive workshop conducted by a visiting philosopher whose work was, she assured Bryce, extremely relevant to his own intellectual concerns.

"What philosopher?" Bryce asked.

She hesitated, a moment of blankness that seemed to pass across her face like a cloud, and then provided a name that Bryce did not recognize. Klaus Mendelssohn. German. Contemporary. Work on authenticity and complicity.

"I've never heard of him," Bryce said.

"He's quite influential in certain circles," the woman said. Her accent was not Turkish. European, perhaps German, perhaps Austrian. "The workshop begins at eight o'clock. You'll need to travel to a different location. This address." She handed him a card. The address was in Beyoglu, several kilometers from the current symposium location.

"Why?" Bryce asked. "Why this special session? And why am I selected?"

"Your work was recommended," the woman said. "By one of the symposium organizers. Someone who has followed your practice for quite some time."

She left before he could ask further questions. Bryce stood in the doorway, holding the card, aware that something in this exchange had been slightly off. The woman's responses had been too smooth, too rehearsed. Or perhaps not too smooth, simply smooth in a way that suggested the conversation was not, in fact, a conversation but rather a predetermined sequence of statements. Her hesitation when he asked about the philosopher had been the only moment of authenticity, if authenticity could be read in a moment of blank confusion.

He looked at the card. The address. An unfamiliar part of the city. The time: 8:00 PM. No other information. No name of the venue. No phone number.

Bryce had spent twelve years constructing a critical practice around suspicion of authority, around the interrogation of power, around the refusal to accept the legitimacy of institutional frameworks. He should have been suspicious of this. He should have recognized it as exactly the kind of soft coercion that the apparatus of cultural capitalism employed, an invitation that was not an invitation, a selection that was presented as an honor but which implied obligation.

Instead, he found himself making a decision to attend. Not because he believed in the legitimacy of the workshop, but because refusing to attend would require acknowledging that something was wrong. And he was too tired to do that. He was too caught in the momentum of the symposium to step out of it, to question it, to refuse.

He packed his materials into a bag. He showered. He changed into what he considered his "intellectual" clothes, dark jeans, a black button-down shirt that had a small hole in the collar but which still read as intentional, as aesthetic, as part of a practice of resistance through aesthetic refusal. He checked his phone. An email from his gallery in New York about the upcoming exhibition of his Detroit work. A text from his partner asking how the symposium was going.

He did not respond to the text. He put on his shoes and left the room.

The light in the hallway seemed different from how he remembered it. More grey. The walls were a color that was not quite cream but not quite white. He walked to the elevator, pressed the button for the lobby, and waited.

As the elevator descended, he allowed himself a moment of doubt about the whole structure of his life. The art, the theory, the performance of opposition, was any of it real? Or was it all, as Arnd Schmidt might have said, the elaborate construction of a business trying to feel significant in a world that did not particularly care about any significance?

Bryce did not know, who Arnd Schmidt was. Not yet. But the question, the possibility that his entire critical practice was itself a form of complicity, a way of constructing identity, or fueling denial, rather than resisting tyrannical power, would, in a matter of hours, be forced upon him with extraordinary clarity.

In Berlin, Arnd Schmidt was sitting in a café in Prenzlauer Berg, reading the Frankfurter Allgemeine Zeitung, when the woman approached his table. She had not seemed to appear; she had simply been there, standing beside his chair, polite, apologetic, waiting for him to acknowledge her presence. He looked up from the newspaper, which had been reporting on the latest attacks, the latest political machinery turning, and met her eyes.

She was not German. Eastern European, perhaps. Her German was precise, yet carried a slight accent that suggested Russian or Polish origins.

"Herr Schmidt?" she asked.

"Ja?" (German, alike: Yes, please?)

"I wonder, if you might have time for a conversation." She was not asking a genuine question. The structure of the statement was interrogative, but the content was imperative. She was telling him, in the form of a question, that he was going to have time for a conversation because time had already been allocated for it.

Arnd folded his newspaper. He had learned, over the course of his seventy-two years, to recognize the particular kind of power that women like this one wielded, the power of institutional authority, the power of claims made in the name of something larger than individual desire. He recognized it because his entire adult life had been shaped by such claims. The German state is claiming its family's property. Historians claim his family suffered. Intellectuals claiming the right to speak about German guilt. And now, a woman with a precise German accent and Eastern European origins, claiming his time.

"I am listening," he said.

She sat down without being invited. This was deliberate, he understood. A small assertion of power. She explained that there was an event, a private philosophical workshop, being organized for a select number of intellectuals. His work, his scholarship on German history and complicity, had been noted. He was being invited to participate.

"What work?" Arnd asked. He had published extensively, yes, but his most recent publications had been in specialized journals, addressed to small audiences. His major work, a study of how German intellectual circles had rationalized their complicity with the Nazi regime, had come out seventeen years ago. It had been well-reviewed in certain circles but had never achieved the kind of popular reach that would make his work recognizable to random organizers of philosophical workshops.

"Your historical scholarship," the woman said. "Particularly your analysis of how individuals become complicit with systems they ostensibly oppose."

Arnd smiled slightly. He had recognized something in her mention of this topic. She was not, he sensed, delivering a message that she herself understood. She was performing a role, delivering a script, and the script was meant to appeal to something in him, to his sense of his own intellectual importance, his sense that his work mattered, that it had been noticed by people in positions of authority.

"Where is this workshop?" he asked.

She provided an address in Spandau. A location that did not fit any pattern Arnd could discern. Not a university. Not a conference center. Simply an address.

"And who is organizing this?" he pressed.

Again, there was that moment of blankness, that pause where the script seemed to have momentarily malfunctioned. She provided a name, Klaus Mendelssohn, and mentioned work on authenticity and complicity and the problem of moral judgment in an age of global complicity.

Arnd had heard the name vaguely, in passing, in academic conversations. A German-speaking theorist working in the American academic system. Nothing remarkable. Nothing that would justify this kind of personal recruitment.

But he accepted the invitation. Not because he believed in it, but because refusal would require acknowledging doubt, and doubt required acknowledging the possibility that something was fundamentally wrong with the architecture of his understanding. Arnd had spent seventy-two years constructing a framework that allowed him to live with the historical guilt of being German, with the personal guilt of having benefited from a Reich that destroyed his family, with the larger guilt of being implicated in contemporary systems of injustice despite his intellectual opposition to them.

To refuse this invitation would be to acknowledge that the framework itself was inadequate, that refusal was the only authentic gesture available, and that authenticity might itself be an illusion.

He preferred, at seventy-two years of age, to maintain the framework. It was easier. It was what he knew.

"I will attend," he told the woman.

She provided the time, 8:00 PM that evening, and left the café without further conversation. Arnd returned to his newspaper. The news had not changed. More attacks. More politics. More evidence that the twentieth century had failed to resolve anything fundamental about human nature.

He drank his coffee, which had grown cold, and thought about his grandfather, who had died in Theresienstadt. He thought about his father, who had survived the war and spent forty years trying to construct a moral framework that could accommodate his complicity. He thought about himself, who had inherited this project and had spent his decades expanding it, refining it, articulating it in increasingly sophisticated language.

And then, as evening approached, he gathered his things, paid his bill, and began the journey toward Spandau.

Neither man knew, at this point, that they were traveling toward the same destination. Neither understood that they had been selected not for their intellectual work, nor for their scholarly contributions, but for a specific and terrible complementarity: The way their opposition to each other, their fundamental disagreement about history and morality, and the possibility of authentic resistance, would serve as the foundation for what was about to happen.

They were each traveling toward a hotel. The hotel was already prepared for them. And the hotel, though neither of them understood this yet, was not merely a physical structure. It was a manifestation, a space engineered specifically for their arrival, a space that would become, over the course of their time within it, a perfect representation of their doom.

Chapter 2: The Arrival

Bryce's taxi crossed through the city in the early evening, moving from the symposium's location in Sultanahmet through the noise and congestion of Istanbul's streets. The driver did not know the address. Bryce had to spell it out, letter by letter, and even then, there was confusion. The address seemed to exist on maps but not in the driver's experience of the city. They circled through Beyoglu, passed through neighborhoods that Bryce did not recognize, and finally arrived at a location that did not correspond to any clear landmark.

The building was elegant in the way of European hotels from the 1920s or 1930s, art deco influence, but subdued, restrained. There were no other cars in front. No obvious signs of activity. A single light burned above the entrance. The driver seemed uncertain about whether this was the correct location.

"Yes," Bryce said. "This is it."

He paid the driver, added a tip that was slightly too generous (a gesture of apology, perhaps, or a gesture of assertion, claiming the right to determine value), and stepped out onto the street.

The hotel stood alone on the block. It was not dilapidated, but it had the quality of a structure that existed slightly outside of contemporary time. The paint on the facade was clean but faded. The windows were dark. The single light above the entrance cast everything in sepia tones.

Bryce approached the entrance. The doors were not locked. Inside, the lobby was vast and empty. A reception desk with no one behind it. A few pieces of furniture, chairs, and a sofa, arranged without apparent regard for use. Everything was clean. Everything was precise. Everything was fundamentally wrong in a way that Bryce could not yet articulate.

A man appeared from behind the desk. Had he been there the entire time, or had he emerged from some interior space? Bryce could not determine.

"Welcome," the man said. His accent was indeterminate, European, certainly, but which European nation was impossible to say. "You are early. The workshop has not yet begun. But you may wait here. There will be others arriving shortly."

"What is this place?" Bryce asked.

"A hotel," the man said. He smiled without showing any particular emotion. "And a venue for the workshop. You will see. Everything will be explained."

Bryce waited. He sat in one of the chairs in the lobby. The chair was uncomfortable in a way that seemed intentional, as if it had been designed to prevent settled occupation. He looked around the lobby, trying to discern something that would make sense of the space, some principle that organized it.

The light from the entrance seemed to stop at a certain point in the lobby, as if the darkness beyond was denser, more substantial. The furniture cast shadows that did not quite correspond to the light sources. Or perhaps Bryce was simply tired. The flight, the jet lag, the symposium, all of it had accumulated into a kind of weariness that made him suspicious of his own perceptions.

A woman entered through the doors. She was Asian, Vietnamese, perhaps, or Chinese. She looked around the lobby with an expression of confusion that mirrored Bryce's.

"This is where the workshop is supposed to be?" she asked him.

"Supposedly," Bryce said.

She sat several chairs away from him. They did not speak. The silence was not hostile, yet neither was it comfortable. Both of them existed in the same space of disorientation, unable to account for it or escape it.

Time moved in the lobby. Bryce could not determine how much time had passed. It might have been twenty minutes. It might have been an hour. Eventually, he noticed that the woman was gone. At what point she had left, he could not say. She had, at some moment, ceased to be present.

A man appeared behind the desk again. The same man, perhaps. Or a different man. They had similar features.

"Your room is ready," the man said. "Second floor. Room 217. The workshop will not begin until eight o'clock. You may retire to your room, or you may explore the hotel. As you wish."

"Where do I get my key?" Bryce asked.

"There is no lock," the man said. "Simply push the door. It will open."

Bryce climbed the stairs. The hotel's interior was even more disorienting than the lobby. The corridors seemed to extend in unexpected directions. Windows appeared on walls that he would have expected to be interior. The light was consistent, neither bright nor dim, simply uniform, and cast no particular shadows.

Room 217 was where the man had said it would be, or perhaps it was not. Bryce had lost track of the numerical sequence. The room was clean and sparse. A bed, a desk, a chair, a window that opened onto darkness. The darkness was not the darkness of night but something more absolute, more fundamental.

Bryce sat on the bed. He checked his phone. No signal. He tried the light switch. The light worked. He lay back on the bed and stared at the ceiling, which was plain white and unmarked.

He could have been there for minutes or hours. At some point, he became aware of a sound, distant, indeterminate. Not quite music, not quite speech. Something that existed at the boundary of audibility.

He rose and went to the window. The darkness beyond the glass had not changed. It was still absolute. Still incomprehensible.

He opened the window. The air beyond was neither warm nor cold. It was simply present, available, indicating nothing.

Bryce closed the window. He checked the time on his phone, the only reliable measure of temporal sequence that he possessed. 7:47 PM. The workshop would begin in thirteen minutes.

He descended the stairs. He did not pass anyone in the corridors. He did not encounter the man behind the desk. The lobby, when he reached it, was empty.

Arnd arrived at the address in Spandau as the sky was beginning to transition from blue to grey. The building was unremarkable, neither beautiful nor ugly, simply present. A small sign, faded, reading "Hotel Residenz" in letters that had once been gold.

He was not surprised by the disorientation. He had lived long enough to recognize the particular quality of spaces that existed in moral and historical ambiguity. This building had that quality, the quality of a place that had contained history without being particularly marked by it.

The lobby was empty when he entered. A man stood behind the desk, or did not stand, but was simply present there, as if materiality and immateriality had become indistinguishable.

"Herr Schmidt," the man said. "Welcome. Your room is prepared. The workshop begins at eight o'clock."

Arnd did not ask questions. He had long since stopped being surprised by institutional machinery that seemed to know information it should not possess. This was simply how power operated; it knew who you were before you arrived. It had already made decisions about you.

He climbed the stairs. The hotel's interior was the interior of a thousand European hotels, the same proportions, the same colors, the same fundamental wrongness that had characterized European architecture since the 1920s. This was the architecture of the era when his family still possessed titles and money, when Germany still believed in certain forms of order and hierarchy.

His room was on the third floor. Room 317. The number was precise, methodical. Everything about this space was precise, as if it had been engineered rather than constructed, planned rather than evolved.

The room itself was sparse. A bed, a desk, a window that opened onto nothing. Arnd sat at the desk and looked around. This was the space in which he would exist. He did not know how long. He did not know why he had been brought here. But he recognized that he was here, that the machinery of circumstance had delivered him to this specific location, and that resistance was too late. Acceptance was the only possible gesture.

He checked the time. 7:52 PM. Eight minutes until the workshop would begin, wherever it was being conducted.

He did not move to leave the room immediately. Instead, he sat at the desk and thought about his family, about the titles and the property and the people who had been destroyed, and about himself, who had survived by virtue of accident and geography and the randomness of history.

He thought about how every intellectual framework he had constructed, every theory he had articulated, every position he had adopted had been, in some fundamental sense, an attempt to live with the fact that he had survived when others had not. The guilt of survival was the foundational truth beneath all of his work. Everything else was elaboration, explanation, and rationalization.

At precisely 8:00 PM, though he had not checked a clock, Arnd stood and left his room. He did not encounter anyone in the corridors. He did not pass the desk. The lobby, when he reached it, was empty.

Chapter 3: The Mutual Recognition

The workshop was not held in a conference room. It was held in a space that Bryce would later struggle to describe, a vast room in the hotel's interior, a room that seemed to occupy more floor space than the exterior dimensions of the building should have allowed. The space was windowless. The light came from no identifiable source. The walls were white, unmarked, extending upward into a ceiling that was lost in brightness.

There were chairs arranged in a circle. Bryce saw the woman who had left the lobby. He saw Arnd Schmidt, though he did not yet know his name. He saw three other people, all of them sitting in the chairs, all of them arranged with perfect spatial separation, as if the configuration had been predetermined.

There was no sign of Klaus Mendelssohn. There was no one at a podium or lectern. There were simply the five of them, sitting in the chairs, waiting.

Bryce chose a seat. Arnd chose a seat across from him. They made eye contact briefly, a moment of mutual recognition that was not based on prior acquaintance but on a kind of intuitive understanding of opposition.

Bryce saw an older white man, German or Austrian, physically marked by age, bearing in his posture something of European intellectualism and European guilt. Arnd saw a younger Black American carrying the particular intensity of someone who had constructed an identity around political opposition.

Neither man had to speak to understand that they disagreed fundamentally about something important.

They waited. The other three people in the circle did not seem particularly present. They sat with the quality of things that were almost but not quite conscious.

Then Bryce heard a voice. It came from everywhere and nowhere. It had no identifiable gender. It spoke in English, but with an accent that suggested multiple linguistic origins.

"Welcome," the voice said. "Thank you for accepting the invitation to attend this workshop. I am Klaus Mendelssohn, though the name is not particularly important. What is important is that you are all here, together, in this space. You have been selected because you represent, in your work and your positions, a particular kind of complicity that we wish to examine."

No one was visible. The voice continued.

"You have all constructed intellectual and artistic frameworks that claim to oppose complicity. You have all articulated positions that you believe to be authentic, that you believe resist the machinery of power. But all of you are, in fundamental ways, trapped in the very systems you claim to oppose. Your opposition is itself a form of complicity. Your authenticity is itself a performance."

Bryce felt the words like an accusation. He wanted to respond, to defend his work, to articulate the nuance that the voice was dismissing. But something in the quality of the space prevented him from speaking.

"You will have time here," the voice continued, "to examine this complicity. You will have time to question your positions, your authenticity, and your opposition. You will have time to understand what you actually are, beneath the frameworks you have constructed."

The voice stopped. The presence that had filled the space seemed to withdraw. After a moment, the circle of chairs was empty except for Bryce and Arnd. The other three people had vanished, or had perhaps never been fully present.

Bryce and Arnd looked at each other across the circle.

"Was that the workshop?" Bryce asked.

"Perhaps," Arnd said. His voice was precise, educated, carrying the weight of extensive thinking. "Or perhaps the workshop has merely begun."

"That makes no sense," Bryce said. "What are we supposed to do here? How long are we supposed to stay?"

"I don't know," Arnd said. He stood. "But I suspect we will find out."

They moved through the hotel together, not by choice but by a kind of mutual momentum. Bryce found himself matching Arnd's pace, following his direction through corridors that seemed to have no particular destination.

"Who are you?" Bryce asked.

"My name is Arnd Schmidt. I am a scholar of German history. I have spent most of my life thinking about complicity and guilt." He said this without inflection, as if delivering biographical information rather than a life story.

"Bryce Succor. I'm an artist. Conceptual work, primarily. A kind of political practice."

"Yes," Arnd said. "I could tell. You have the look of someone who believes that art can accomplish something. Someone who still believes that opposition is possible."

There was no particular hostility in the statement, but Bryce felt it as an accusation nonetheless.

"And you don't?" Bryce asked.

"I believe that opposition is necessary," Arnd said. "But whether it accomplishes anything beyond the construction of identity, this is a question that has troubled me for many years."

They were in a corridor now, moving through the hotel's interior, and Bryce was beginning to notice things that had seemed invisible before, the way the light seemed to originate from no source, the way the walls seemed to recede into distance even as they approached them, the way time seemed to have become elastic and unreliable.

"What is this place?" Bryce asked. "Why have we been brought here?"

"Because," Arnd said, "we represent something that interests whoever orchestrated this. Two men, fundamentally opposed to each other in our positions and our histories, trapped in a space and forced to confront each other."

"Orchestrated by whom?"

"By whatever force designs such things," Arnd said. He had stopped walking now. They were standing in the lobby again, though Bryce had not been aware of moving through space to reach it. "I suspect we will have considerable time to discuss this question."

Chapter 4: The Antagonism Deepens

They began arguing that evening, in what might have been a dining room or might have been any large space with tables and chairs. There was food present, simple, prepared, cool, and water in glasses that had been filled by no visible hand. They ate in silence for a time, but the silence was charged with the energy of people who had recognized in each other a fundamental opposition.

It was Arnd who initiated the conflict.

"Your work," he said, "is predicated on a belief in the significance of artistic opposition. This is a luxury of the American left, the belief that you can critique power from within the institutions of power, and that the critique itself constitutes a form of resistance."

"My work is based on the understanding that we are all implicated," Bryce said. "That there is no position of purity from which to speak. So we work from complicity, acknowledging complicity."

"Yes," Arnd said. "And in acknowledging complicity, you neutralize the ethical demand to actually oppose. You make complicity into an aesthetic category. A position to perform."

"And what do you do?" Bryce asked. "What is your position? You speak about German guilt, as if you have some special claim to it, some special understanding. But isn't that also a narcissist defiance? Using history as a way to construct identity?"

"Of course, it is a performance," Arnd said. His voice remained level, but there was something in his eyes now, a kind of wounded precision. "I have never pretended otherwise. My family was destroyed by the Nazis. This is not performance. This is history. And yes, I use this history to speak about complicity because I believe it is important to understand how complicity works, how systems of destruction are enabled by ordinary people engaging in ordinary compromises."

"But you use your family's suffering as a way to claim moral authority," Bryce said. "That's what I'm pointing out. You use victimization as a form of power."

"And you use opposition as a form of identity," Arnd countered. "You construct yourself as the one who resists. But what have you resisted? What institutions have you actually challenged? You exhibit in the same galleries, you attend the same conferences, you participate in the same economy of cultural capital as everyone else. The only difference is that you talk about it. You make your complicity explicit, and you call this honesty. This is not honesty. This is simply a more sophisticated form of complicity."

Bryce felt the accusation like violence, not physical but existential. Because part of him knew that Arnd was right. Part of him had always known that his critical practice was, in some fundamental way, a performance. But acknowledging this felt like the collapse of everything he had constructed, everything he had believed in.

"You speak as if authenticity is possible," Bryce said. "As if there is some position of purity from which someone can speak. There isn't. We are all trapped. The only honest response is to acknowledge the trap."

"The trap is real," Arnd said. "But acknowledging the trap is not the same as escaping it. And acknowledging it, while continuing to operate within it, is itself a kind of complicity."

"So what do you propose?" Bryce asked. "That we refuse participation? That we reject the institutions entirely?"

"I have no proposal," Arnd said. "I have lived seventy-two years and have not yet formulated an adequate response. But I know what inadequate responses look like. I know what intellectual cowardice looks like. And I recognize it in your work."

This silenced Bryce. He had been challenged before, by critics, by colleagues, by people who disagreed with his positions. But he had never been challenged in a way that seemed to touch something fundamental, something he had not permitted himself to fully acknowledge.

"You're right," Bryce said finally. "Some of it is performance. I've always known that. But what else is there? What else can we do?"

"I don't know," Arnd said. "But I think we need to at least admit the limits of what we can accomplish. We need to stop pretending that we are more significant than we are."

They fell into silence. The food on the table had grown cold. The water in the glasses had developed a quality of stagnation, as if it had been there for much longer than the time that had actually passed.

"Where do we sleep?" Bryce asked finally.

"Wherever the hotel arranges for us to sleep," Arnd said.

They stood and moved through the corridors. The hotel guided them, without any conscious direction on their part, back to their separate rooms. Bryce understood, as he lay on the bed in room 217, that something had shifted. The antagonism with Arnd had been necessary, had been inevitable. But it had also been dangerous in a way he could not yet articulate. It had introduced a crack in his framework, a possibility of doubt that he had not previously allowed himself to entertain.

He fell asleep without meaning to.

Arnd, lying in room 317, thought about how his entire adult life had been constructed around the assumption that understanding complicity was a form of resistance. But what if it was merely a form of thinking about complicity? What if understanding changed nothing?

This thought occupied his consciousness as he drifted toward sleep.

Chapter 5: The Building Begins

On the second day, Bryce and Arnd became aware that the hotel was not arranged as they had previously understood it. This realization came gradually, accumulating through a series of disorienting moments rather than arriving as a clear epiphany.

Bryce left his room and attempted to descend the stairs to the lobby. But the stairs extended longer than they should have. He descended for what felt like fifteen minutes and found himself not in the lobby but in a corridor he did not recognize. He attempted to return to his room, but when he climbed the stairs that should have led back up, he instead found himself descending again, entering a different corridor, encountering a window that opened onto darkness.

He encountered Arnd in the second-floor corridor.

"The spatial configuration is unstable," Arnd said. He had been attempting to locate the dining room and had instead found a library, or what appeared to be a library, though the books on the shelves contained no text, only blank pages.

"It's like the building is changing," Bryce said. "Or like we're not remembering it correctly."

"One or the other," Arnd said. "Or both."

They attempted to map the hotel. They moved through its corridors methodically, trying to establish a coherent layout. But the more they moved through the space, the less coherent it became. A corridor that they had walked down twice seemed to extend in three different directions on the third attempt. A room that they had entered from the east seemed to open, from a different approach, onto a completely different interior.

By the afternoon of the second day, they began arguing again. The argument was intertwined with their growing realization that something was fundamentally wrong with the space itself.

"This is intentional," Bryce said. "The space is being deliberately arranged to disorient us."

"Of course it is intentional," Arnd said. "Someone has brought us here deliberately. Someone is conducting this. The question is: why?"

"To destabilize us? To force us to question something?"

"Perhaps," Arnd said. They were standing in the lobby again, though neither of them was certain how they had arrived there. "Or perhaps simply to trap us. There may be no larger purpose."

"There's always a purpose," Bryce said. "Even if the purpose is just to demonstrate powerlessness. Even that is a kind of message."

"Is it?" Arnd asked. "Or is that simply how we interpret random oppression? We construct narratives of purpose around circumstances that may have no purpose at all."

Bryce wanted to respond, wanted to argue that meaning could be constructed even in meaninglessness. But something about Arnd's question had penetrated his defenses. What if there was no purpose? What if they had simply been placed here for no reason at all?

"I don't know," Bryce admitted.

The admission seemed to satisfy Arnd in a way that an aggressive argument would not have. He nodded, as if acknowledging a genuine moment of honesty.

"Neither do I," Arnd said. "But we will have time to formulate theories. We will have considerable time."

That night, Bryce discovered that the window in his room opened not onto darkness but onto another room, a room that appeared to be identical to his own. He opened the window and peered through. The other room was empty. When he closed the window and looked again minutes later, a figure was standing in the other room. When he opened the window a second time, the other room was gone.

Arnd found that the walls of his room were not where they appeared to be. When he attempted to touch the wall that was three meters to his left, his hand passed through empty air where the wall should not have existed. When he approached what appeared to be an empty space, he encountered a surface of solid resistance.

Chapter 6: The Space Resists

On the third day, they attempted to escape.

The attempt was not conscious. Rather, the desire to escape had begun to accumulate beneath conscious awareness, and it finally manifested in action. Bryce and Arnd met in the lobby and, without discussion, moved toward the entrance.

The doors were not locked. They opened onto the street where Bryce had arrived, the same street, the same darkness beyond, the same absence of any clear geography. Bryce stepped outside. The air was indeterminate in temperature. The darkness was absolute beyond a certain distance from the building. He walked. After what felt like twenty steps, he turned to see how far he had come.

The hotel was still directly behind him. He had not moved. Or the distance was not functioning as distance. He walked further. After a hundred steps, or what felt like a hundred steps, the hotel was still equally close. He could see it with perfect clarity, the entrance, the single light, everything exactly as it had been.

He returned to the entrance. Arnd was still standing in the doorway, watching him.

"It doesn't work," Bryce said.

"No," Arnd said. "It doesn't."

They tried the other exits. The west entrance led to a corridor that spiraled back into the building. The east entrance opened onto an interior hallway. The south entrance did not exist; the door opened onto the room where they had experienced the voice on the first evening.

On the second day of attempting escape, Bryce tried to climb toward the roof. He ascended what appeared to be stairs to an upper floor, found what appeared to be a stairwell leading upward, climbed with increasing desperation, and eventually realized that he was descending. The stairs had inverted themselves without his noticing.

Arnd attempted to find a phone. He discovered, through rigorous searching, what appeared to be a telephone in the lobby. When he picked up the receiver, the voice on the other end was his own. Not a recording of his voice but his actual voice, speaking words that he was not speaking, saying things that he did not know he thought.

By the evening of the fourth day, both men had ceased attempting escape. They sat in one of the hotel's rooms, a room that neither of them had discovered before, a room that seemed to have no entrance or exit, a room that was simply present when they needed a place to sit.

"The space is impossible," Bryce said.

"Yes," Arnd said. "But we are in it. So either our understanding of what is possible is incorrect, or our understanding of what space is has been fundamentally challenged."

"Or we're hallucinating," Bryce said. "Or dreaming. Or mad."

"Perhaps," Arnd said. "But those categories no longer seem to apply. We are experiencing something that our conceptual framework was not designed to contain."

They sat in silence. The room around them was neither well-lit nor dark. It was simply present, a space that contained them but did not, in any obvious way, relate to anything else.

"I think we should stop trying to escape," Arnd said finally.

"How long can you exist in a space like this?" Bryce asked.

"I don't know," Arnd said. "But I suspect longer than we can maintain the illusion that escape is possible."

Chapter 7: Memory Intrusions

It began on the fifth day as a sensation, a moment where Bryce's consciousness seemed to split, where two streams of experience were flowing simultaneously. He was in the hotel, arguing with Arnd about the nature of authenticity, and at the same time, he was standing in a seminar room in Istanbul, preparing to give his presentation.

The intrusion was not violent, but it was undeniable. He was present in both moments simultaneously.

The sensation passed. He was back in the hotel, alone with Arnd, both of them looking at each other with expressions of shared disorientation.

"Did you, " Bryce began.

"Yes," Arnd said. "A moment. A different moment. My past."

The intrusions became more frequent. Throughout the sixth day, Bryce experienced fragments of memory that seemed to arrive unbidden, interrupting the present:

The smell of the symposium's conference room, the particular quality of its air circulation, and the buzz of fluorescent lighting overhead.

A conversation with his gallery owner about the reception to his Detroit work, the way the dealer had presented sales figures with false enthusiasm.

The moment when his mother had asked him, years ago, what his art was actually supposed to accomplish in the world. The way he had not been able to answer.

These memories were not reflections or recollections. They were intrusions of the past into the present, moments that seemed to be occurring again, but which he was experiencing from a distance, as if observing them.

Arnd experienced similar intrusions:

His grandfather's face, which he had never actually seen but which appeared in the memories with absolute clarity.

The moment when he had decided to become a scholar of German history, not as a considered intellectual choice but as an inevitability, something that had been determined by circumstance and inheritance.

A conversation with a friend, years ago, where he had admitted that his entire intellectual framework was constructed to avoid confronting the possibility that his life had no particular significance.

"What is happening?" Bryce asked Arnd on the evening of the sixth day. They were in the dining space, having consumed food whose origin and nature remained opaque.

"I think memory is becoming unstable," Arnd said. "Or perhaps time is becoming unstable. The boundary between past and present is no longer fixed."

"Why now?" Bryce asked. "Why is this happening now?"

"Because," Arnd said, "we are no longer in a space governed by normal temporal physics. We are in a space where the normal rules do not apply. And this space is beginning to make explicit what has always been implicit."

"Which is what?"

"That we are ghosts," Arnd said. His voice was calm, philosophical. "Or close enough to ghosts that the distinction no longer matters."

Chapter 8: Death Acknowledged

The memory came to Bryce on the afternoon of the seventh day with complete clarity, not as an intrusion but as an undeniable fact.

He was at the symposium in Istanbul. He was in the seminar room, standing with other artists and theorists, discussing Western complicity in the machinery of empire. Someone was speaking about the politics of representation. The voice was continuing, articulate, thoughtful.

And then, a sensation of heat. A sound that was not quite sound, a vibration that moved through the room.

Confusion. Pain. The moment where coherent consciousness seemed to fractionate.

And then nothing. Then the hotel lobby. Then Arnd.

The memory was not reconstructed. It was directly experienced. Bryce understood that he was remembering something that had actually occurred, something that had actually killed him.

He found Arnd in the lobby.

"I died," Bryce said.

Arnd nodded. "I know. I also died."

"How do you know?"

"Because I remember it. And because we are here."

"Where is here?" Bryce asked. His voice sounded strange to him, attenuated, as if the act of speaking required more energy than it should.

"A place for those who have died," Arnd said. "A place designed specifically for us, I believe."

"For what purpose?"

"I don't know," Arnd said. "But I have a theory. I believe we were brought here because we represent something, a particular kind of unresolved contradiction in the contemporary world."

They sat down, both of them, in the chairs of the lobby. Bryce's death, the jihadist attack in Istanbul, was not recent. He could not determine how long ago it had occurred. The temporal sequence seemed disordered, confused.

"How long have we been here?" he asked.

"I don't know," Arnd said. "Time is not functioning normally. It may have been days. It may have been years."

"What happens now?"

"We exist," Arnd said. "We confront what we have become. We attempt to understand what it means to no longer be alive."

Bryce tried to stand and found that the movement required no effort whatsoever. He was simply standing. The distinction between effort and non-effort had become meaningless.

He went to the window. Outside, the city, if it was a city, remained indeterminate, undefined, full of darkness. He understood that he would never leave this place. He understood that the hotel was not merely a space he occupied but something closer to a representation of his own ontological status.

Arnd was explaining something about purgatory, about spaces designed for those whom God and the Devil had deemed insufficiently important to merit judgment. But Bryce was no longer listening. He was occupied with the fundamental vertigo of understanding that his entire life had been leading toward this, toward this moment of complete annihilation of significance, toward this revelation that he had never mattered at all.

Chapter 9: The Space Speaks

On what might have been the fifteenth day, though time had become so disordered that counting days seemed absurd, Bryce and Arnd discovered something new about the hotel's architecture.

They were attempting to move from the lobby to what they had previously identified as the dining room. Instead, the door they exited opened onto the same corridor from three different spatial angles simultaneously. They walked through the doorway and found themselves exiting not from the direction they had entered but from perpendicular directions, all of them leading into the same space.

"The hotel is not governed by Euclidean geometry," Arnd said. He was stating the obvious, but stating it seemed important, as if naming the phenomenon might make it more comprehensible.

"What geometry is it governed by?" Bryce asked.

"I don't know," Arnd said. "But it is internally consistent. It follows its own logic. The problem is that our consciousness was not designed to perceive that logic."

They continued through the hotel, no longer attempting to map or escape but simply moving, observing, trying to develop an intuitive understanding of how space could function according to such non-Euclidean principles.

Bryce opened a window in what he believed to be a room on the second floor. The window opened not onto the street or the city but onto a corridor, the same corridor they had just exited. When he looked out the window, he could see himself exiting from the door they had just passed through.

"We are walking through ourselves," Arnd said. His voice carried something that might have been awe or might have been despair. "The hotel is not a place we occupy. The hotel is a structure that represents the shape of our consciousness."

"That doesn't make any sense," Bryce said. But even as he said it, he understood that it made perfect sense. The impossible geometry was not a puzzle to be solved. It was a representation, a manifestation, a space that had been deliberately engineered to make explicit what had always been implicit about their own consciousness.

They continued deeper into the hotel, finding rooms that contained other rooms, corridors that folded back on themselves, windows that opened not onto external spaces but onto representations of internal spaces. By the evening of that day, or perhaps by the beginning of the evening, the distinction no longer seemed important; they had come to understand that the hotel was not a trap they were imprisoned within.

The hotel *was* them. Or rather, the hotel was a manifestation of what they had become in death. They were not trapped. They *were* the trapment. They were the consciousness that the hotel represented. And the impossible geometry was the geometry of their own fragmented, disordered, fundamentally contradictory consciousness.

"I think," Arnd said as they stood in a vast room that seemed to extend infinitely in all directions while simultaneously being no larger than a closet, "that we should stop resisting this place. I think we should accept that this is what we are now."

Chapter 10: The Absence of Judgment

It occurred to both Bryce and Arnd on the same afternoon, or perhaps in the same moment, time having become so disordered that sequence was meaningless, that they were not being punished.

Arnd articulated it first. They were in the central atrium of the hotel, standing in a space that seemed to exist in some kind of permanent present, neither advancing nor receding. He turned to Bryce and said:

"We are not being punished. Do you understand? We are not being tested, judged, or damned. We have simply been rejected."

"Rejected by what?" Bryce asked.

"By everything," Arnd said. "By God, because God has no particular interest in us. By the Devil, because the Devil has more interesting sinners to occupy his attention. Historically, because we are insignificant in the scope of historical events. By morality, because morality itself may be nothing more than a social construction with no transcendent validity."

Bryce felt the weight of this statement. His entire life had been constructed on the assumption that his opposition, his artistic practice, his moral positioning *meant* something. It meant something to God, to the universe, to history. Someone was watching. Someone cared enough to oppose.

Now he understood: no one was watching. No one cared. The jihadist who had killed him had not killed him as a political statement or a moral judgment. He had killed him because Bryce had been in the wrong place at the wrong time. Random. Meaningless. An absolute absence of significance.

"So what happens now?" Bryce asked.

"We exist," Arnd said. "Without meaning. Without purpose. Without judgment. We are ghosts of no consequence, in a space designed for ghosts of no consequence, waiting for nothing because there is nothing to wait for."

The vertigo that Bryce experienced was not like any emotion he had previously encountered. It was not despair, because despair required the possibility of change. It was not grief, because grief required the loss of something that had once been real. It was something closer to a recognition of fundamental annihilation, not of the body, but of significance, of meaning, of the entire framework through which he had understood his existence.

"I spent my entire life believing that opposition was possible," Bryce said. "That art could change consciousness. That resistance meant something."

"I spent my entire life bearing witness to historical catastrophe," Arnd said. "Ensuring that the deaths of my family would not be forgotten. Constructing frameworks that would make that death mean something."

"And now?"

"Now we understand that we were performing for an audience that never existed," Arnd said. "We were constructing meaning in a cosmos that is fundamentally indifferent to our meaning-making."

They stood in silence for what might have been hours. The light in the atrium did not change. The temperature remained constant. The space around them was neither welcoming nor hostile, simply present, indifferent, complete in its disregard for their understanding or their confusion.

"The worst part," Bryce said finally, "is that this understanding changes nothing. We are still here. We are still ourselves. The only thing that has changed is that we now see our imprisonment with absolute clarity."

"Yes," Arnd said. "But clarity, even when it offers nothing, is perhaps better than delusion. At least now we are not lying to ourselves."

Chapter 11: The Hour of Refusal

On what might have been the thirtieth day, Bryce had stopped attempting to count; he and Arnd had a conversation that seemed to resolve nothing while simultaneously resolving everything.

They were in the lobby, sitting in the same chairs, observing the same unchanging light, when Arnd asked: "Do you understand what we are?"

Bryce did not answer immediately. He was considering the question, turning it over in his consciousness, understanding that any answer would necessarily be inadequate, and that he was going to provide an answer anyway because the alternative was silence, and silence was becoming unbearable.

"We are ghosts," Bryce said finally. "Not metaphorical ghosts. Literal ghosts. Consciousness without a body. Existence without participation in the world."

"And what is a ghost, fundamentally?" Arnd asked.

"Something that should not be," Bryce said. "Something that violates the normal order. The dead should be dead. The living should be living. Ghosts are the violation of that distinction."

"So we are violations," Arnd said. "We are ontological impossibilities. We are beings to whom existence has been denied, but who continue nonetheless."

"Why?" Bryce asked. "Why do we continue? What force is maintaining our consciousness in this space?"

"Perhaps nothing," Arnd said. "Perhaps we are maintaining our consciousness. Perhaps the force that keeps us here is simply our refusal to cease."

Bryce was quiet. He was thinking about his mother, who was still alive in the world, who did not know that he had died. He was thinking about his artwork, which would remain in galleries, which would outlive him, which would continue to circulate in the world while he existed in this impossibility of non-existence.

"Do you ever think about returning?" he asked Arnd. "About finding a way back to the world?"

"Every moment," Arnd said. "But we have tried. The hotel will not permit it. We are locked here not by external mechanisms, but by the fundamental facts of our being. We are dead. The world of the living is no longer available to us."

"So we simply remain here. Forever."

"Forever," Arnd confirmed. "Or until we can bring ourselves to truly cease. Still, I suspect that cessation is not available to us either. I suspect we are condemned to exist in this space, in this state, with full awareness of the meaninglessness of that existence."

Bryce found that he was not outraged by this pronouncement. He was not despairing. He was simply tired, the kind of fundamental exhaustion that comes not from physical fatigue, but from the collapse of every framework through which one has understood oneself.

"I want to ask you something," Arnd said. "And I want you to answer with absolute honesty, if you are capable of it. Do you believe that your life has meaning? Not in retrospective, not in the construction you are now attempting to make of it, but truly, at the moment you were living it. Did you believe it meant something?"

Bryce considered the question. He was silent for a very long time. Around them, the lobby existed in its state of perpetual stasis, neither changing nor advancing, containing them in its indifferent space.

"No," Bryce said finally. "I didn't believe it. I performed a belief. Yet underneath the performance was a kind of toxic vertigo, a recognition that the meaning was constructed, that it depended entirely on the existence of an audience or a judge. Without that audience, without that judge, it all collapsed into nothing."

"So your opposition was not authentic," Arnd said.

"My opposition was as authentic as anything in my life could be," Bryce said. "But authenticity, it turns out, is not the same as truth. It is possible to be authentically inauthentic. It is possible to perform your collapse with genuine sincerity."

"Yes," Arnd said. "This is what I have come to understand about myself. My witness to history, my bearing of memory, my construction of frameworks that could accommodate the death of my family, all of it was authentic in its own way. But all of it was also a kind of performance, a way of making my existence seem significant by virtue of my relationship to other deaths."

"So we were both wrong," Bryce said.

"We were both right," Arnd corrected. "We were also both wrong. We were both authentic and inauthentic. We were both constructing meaning and recognizing the impossibility of meaning. We were performing and sincere simultaneously."

"How is that possible?" Bryce asked.

"Because human consciousness is contradictory," Arnd said. "Because we are capable of holding contradictory beliefs simultaneously. Because meaning and meaninglessness are not opposites. They coexist. They are the same phenomenon viewed from different angles."

They sat in silence. The realization that Arnd had articulated seemed to contain the entire weight of their existence, not as a source of consolation but as an absolute truth from which there was no appeal.

"So what do we do now?" Bryce asked.

"We accept," Arnd said. "We accept that we are here. We accept that we are dead. We accept that our lives have no particular significance. We accept that our opposition was both meaningful and meaningless. We accept the contradiction. We accept the vertigo. We accept the imprisonment. And we stop struggling against it."

Chapter 12: The Void Accommodates

They sat in the atrium together for what might have been three days or three years. Time had become so disordered that the distinction no longer seemed important. Bryce was no longer certain whether he was existing moment by moment or whether all the moments were existing simultaneously, collapsed into a single eternal state of being.

The atrium around them was neither beautiful nor ugly. It was simply a space. The light that illuminated it had no source. The air had no temperature. The ground beneath them had no materiality that they could discern through sensation.

"Do you remember what it felt like to eat?" Bryce asked.

"No," Arnd said. "Or perhaps I do, but the memory has become indistinguishable from the forgetting. It was something that happened. It no longer matters."

"Do you remember what it felt like to have a body?"

"Yes," Arnd said. "But as one remembers a dream. The sensation is available but not real. It is the memory of sensation rather than sensation itself."

They were not arguing. They were simply speaking, their conversation circling through the same observations, the same realizations, in different words, from different angles. The repetition was not productive. It was not leading anywhere. It was simply the form that their existence had taken.

"I don't know, how long I can maintain this," Bryce said. The statement was made without apparent emotion, as if he were observing something happening to someone else.

"Neither do I," Arnd said. "But I suspect longer than we anticipate. I suspect that maintaining this state of existence, even without purpose or meaning, is what we are now capable of doing. I suspect we will continue indefinitely."

"For how long?"

"Forever," Arnd said. "Or until forever becomes unbearable enough that cessation becomes possible. I think that cessation is not actually available to us. I think we are locked into this perpetual existence by the same mechanisms that locked us into this hotel."

Bryce attempted to imagine forever. He attempted to project his consciousness forward into infinite time and found that he could not. The future beyond a certain point became entirely abstract, entirely inaccessible. There was only the present, this eternal present of sitting in the atrium, of existing without living, of being consciousness without content.

"I think I understand something," Bryce said. "About why we were brought here. About why this space was created for us."

"Tell me," Arnd said.

"Because we were the perfect inhabitants for a space like this," Bryce said. "We had spent our lives fighting for meaning, for significance, for understanding. And now we have discovered that all of that was founded on nothing. We are the ideal occupants of a meaningless space because we have already been shaped by meaninglessness.

We have already been, in a sense, dead. Now we are simply experiencing explicitly what we were always experiencing implicitly."

"Yes," Arnd said. "I believe this is true. I believe that is the point of this place. It is not punishment. It is not torture. It is simply clarity. It is the manifestation of the truth that we had spent our lives avoiding."

They sat in silence. The light did not change. The temperature did not change. The space around them did not change. Nothing changed. There was no progression, no development, no possibility of transformation or escape.

At some point, Bryce could not determine when, Arnd ceased to speak. He remained present, seated in the chair beside Bryce, but his consciousness seemed to have withdrawn into some kind of internal stasis. Bryce did not attempt to disturb him. He continued to sit, to exist, to maintain his own consciousness in the face of its own emptiness.

He thought about his family, who mourned him. He thought about his artwork, which continued to circulate in galleries, be discussed, interpreted, and commodified. He thought about the various meanings that had been assigned to his death, the political significance, the moral judgment, the symbolic weight. He understood that all of that was itself a kind of performance, a way of constructing meaning in the face of meaninglessness.

The jihadist who had killed him had not intended any particular meaning. The attack had been random, indiscriminate, targeting no specific person, but rather any person who occupied that space at that moment. Bryce had simply been in the wrong place, and now he occupied this space, this hotel, this atrium, this eternal present.

And understanding this, understanding that his death had no significance, that his life had no particular weight, that the entire structure of meaning that he had constructed was founded on nothing, Bryce found that something in him relaxed. Not reconciled, not at peace, but simply accepting. Accepting the void. Accepting the meaninglessness. Accepting the imprisonment.

He was a ghost. He would remain a ghost. The hotel would continue to contain him, and he would continue to exist within the hotel, and nothing would change, and there would be no liberation, no redemption, no meaning to it all.

The void accommodated him. It did not judge him. It did not punish him. It simply existed, and he existed within it, and that was all that there was or would ever be.

Beside him, Arnd remained in his state of internal stillness, consciousness withdrawn, being reduced to its most minimal manifestation. Bryce did not know if Arnd was still aware, still suffering, still struggling against the implications of their imprisonment. Perhaps Arnd had found some way to cease, not death, but something closer to the absence of consciousness within living form.

Bryce attempted the same thing. He attempted to withdraw his consciousness, to reduce himself to a minimal being, to cease the ongoing process of understanding and recognition that had become unbearable.

But cessation would not come. His consciousness persisted. He remained aware. He continued to exist in full recognition of the meaninglessness of that existence.

The light in the atrium, that light with no source, that light which had remained unchanged for what might have been weeks or years or decades, continued to illuminate the space. The void, patient and indifferent, accommodated both of them.

And they would sit there, in that silence, in that eternal present, in that hotel that was not a hotel, until the end of time or until time itself abandoned them, just as God and the Devil already had.

They were ghosts. They were unwanted. They were meaningless.

And in the absolute clarity of that understanding, they remained, in the dark atrium of the Hotel of Rejected Souls, waiting for nothing, judged by no one, floating forever in the void that had finally learned to accommodate them.

THE END

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